Our Gnome

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In the New England of Dickinson's time, the Bible wasn't just a lexicon of the shared words that makes a culture; it was also an anthology of genres. One of its genres in particular, the parable, exerted its influence on Dickinson's friend J. G. Holland, and Dickinson merrily aped the parabolic style in her letters back to him. But when Dickinson directed her attention elsewhere and styled herself "Your Gnome," she slipped into quite a different genre. How, I wonder below, does she look in that?

In the reading life of Emily Dickinson, parable was one of the normative genres. Everywhere – not just in the Gospels but in such other sources as the sermons of Charles Wadsworth and the allegorical science writing of Edward Hitchcock – Dickinson was served her ethical teachings indirectly, as images arranged within a frame of narrative fiction. Dickinson seemed happy enough to accept the teaching in that form ("The truth must dazzle gradually" [Fr 1263]), but the form itself is, after all, not very compatible with poetry's drive to unify. In parable, form has a semantically competitive relationship with its ostensible content. The narrative frame is meant to be disposable, falling away from the meaning of the story as soon as the moral is revealed, and yet the frame is also the only part of the parable that we remember as an image. In parable, truth is an immortal abstraction embodied in words which can't be separated from their mortal heritage. Poetry doesn't entangle itself in such family complications.

Furthermore, Dickinson usually isn't parabolic because she usually isn't readable by way of the trope of "Once upon a time." The busy verbs in "Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom" (Matthew 25.1) shape the beginning of a story with a plot, but the parting in "Parting is all we know of heaven" (Fr 1773) is a gerund, not a verb. As an account of the kingdom of heaven, it is not a geography or a traveler's tale but an epigram about a noun.

I wonder what we might call the genre to which such an utterance belongs, and I wonder whether asking this question may offer us another way of reading Dickinson.

For now, in the absence of a genre with a name, it's at least reassuring to learn from Cristanne Miller's *Reading in Time* that we can call Dickinson herself a woman of the world. In the past, when we had to read Dickinson without much information about the literary milieu of her words, we kept being startled by hints of supplementary errata in their vicinity. We may have congratulated ourselves on the delicacy of our silence before the searing self-revelation of the "man of noon" letter, letter 93, but how did we feel after Marianne Noble demonstrated that whatever self there is in that letter is paraphrased from a sentimental novel? The paraphrases, we now know, even extended to the poet's representation of what we once took to be her body. As David Cody has discovered, the merry self-portrait in letter 268 ("my Eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves") isn't at all a record of what Emily Dickinson might actually have seen through a mirror. Instead, it is a cento of some words published by another writer – someone whose eyes Dickinson never saw, there on the opaque paper.

What kind of writer writes like that? Cristanne Miller's archaeology of Dickinson's lexicon offers a way to answer such a question in detail. Freeze-framed by Miller before a shelf of bound volumes of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Dickinson becomes visible as a writer writing both through and against the norms of her era.

> While Dickinson sometimes, especially in early letters and poems, used quotation marks to indicate . . . allusion, more often her borrowing was thoroughly absorbed within her own thinking. . . . Once made her own, words and ideas no longer belonged to others who used them first. . . . [This] attitude toward lifting or recirculating what is useful resembles general attitudes of the antebellum culture of reprinting, as analyzed by Meredith McGill. Dickinson is less directly influenced by the individual writers of her time than she is an absorptive reader: everything goes into the mix of her own fertile imagination and becomes "mine," as she says. (2-3)

Miller's Dickinson, then, is one more case history out of Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent": a figure whose ever-changing uniqueness originates in a perpetually self-revised historical context. Amid the flux of that historical change, it may be that we are now in a position to read Dickinson in a new way in relation to the words she once read. Reading old textual comparisons once again, we may be surprised to discover that this time we're in a position to read Dickinson herself anew.

We might commence such an exercise by reading a text from a recent era side by side with a text from Dickinson's time. Into this little two-book library we may then venture to invite Miss Dickinson. As Eliot says by way of providing us with a rationale, "The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them" (38). If we take Dickinson as the really new, we may find as we read that she is capable of modifying both the text from her time and a text from Eliot's time, the modernist era. The modernist text might, for instance, be this one. It concerns a topic that also engaged Dickinson: womanhood.

he wouldn't let her exert her love towards him. No, she had to be passive, to acquiesce, and to be submerged under the surface of love. She had to be like the seaweed she saw as she peered down from the boat, swaying for ever delicately under water, with all their delicate fibrils put tenderly out upon the flood, sensitive, utterly sensitive and receptive within the shadowy sea, and never, never rising and looking forth above water while they lived. Never. Never looking forth from the water until they died, only then washing, corpses, upon the surface. But while they lived, always submerged, always beneath the wave. Beneath the wave they might have powerful roots, stronger than iron, they might be tenacious and dangerous in their soft waving within the flood. Beneath the water they might be stronger, more indestructible than resistant oak trees are on land. But it was always under-water, always under-water. And she, being a woman, must be like that.

And she had been so used to the very opposite. She had had to take all the thought for love and for life, and all the responsibility. Day after day she had been responsible for the coming day, for the coming year: for her dear Jill's health and happiness and well-being. Verily, in her own small way, she had felt herself responsible for the well-being of the world. And this had been her great stimulant, this grand feeling that, in her own small sphere, she was responsible for the well-being of the world.

And she had failed. She knew that, even in her small way, she had failed. She had failed to satisfy her own feeling of responsibility. It was so difficult. It seemed so grand and easy at first. And the more you tried, the more difficult it became. It had seemed so easy to make one beloved creature happy. And the more you tried, the worse the failure. It was terrible. She had been all her life reaching, reaching, and what she reached for seemed so near, until she had stretched to her utmost limit. And then it was always beyond her.

Always beyond her, vaguely, unrealizably beyond her, and she was left with nothingness at last. The life she reached for, the happiness she reached for, the well-being she reached for all slipped back, became unreal, the further she stretched her hand. She wanted some goal, some finality—and there was none. Always this ghastly reaching, reaching, striving for something that might be just beyond. Even to make Jill happy. She was glad Jill was dead. For

Modernist womanhood manifested herself on the page this way in August, 1922. Her embodying text was a novella, "The Fox," the novella's prose style had issued throb by throb from D. H. Lawrence, and the throbs were serially printed in an American literary magazine, *The Dial*. This second *Dial* was to be as important for the reception of modernism as the first had been for the reception of Transcendentalism, and 1922 was modernism's single most important year. *Ulysses* had been published in February of that year, and in November *The Dial* itself would introduce American readers to *The Waste Land.* Between those two monuments stood a man in a red beard, delivering additional remarks.

Thematically, the additional remarks are an anticipation of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, with its thesis that when a man and a woman make love, it's a sin against Mother Nature and Father Freud for the woman to move. Linguistically, the prose gets into the rhythm of that notion three pages later, on the tale's last page. Here at the end of the story our hero, having used his mystical male power to cause a tree to fall on a lesbian, has made her lover his bride. His only remaining task now is to consolidate the conquest of the bride's soul.

> England, to go west, to take March away. To leave this shore! He believed that as they crossed the seas, as they left this England which he so hated, because in some way it seemed to have stung him with poison, she would go to sleep. She would close her eyes at last, and give in to him.
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> And then he would have her and he would have his own life at last. He chafed, feeling he hadn't got his own life. He would never have it till she yielded and slept in him. Then he would have all his own life as a young man and a male, and she would have all her own life as a woman and a female. There would be no more of this awful straining. She would not be a man any more, an independent woman with a man's responsibility. Nay, even the responsibility for her own soul she would have to commit to him. He knew it was so, and obstinately held out against her, waiting for the surrender.

But just now, declaiming his rhythms from the apex of modernism, did D. H. Lawrence actually say "Nay"?

He has already said "Verily." In the moment of its crisis, his language seems to have slipped its Freudian mooring and drifted backward in time to the vocabulary of Thomas Carlyle. "Nay," brays Lawrence's Victorian foghorn – and among the modernist words in *The Dial* for August, 1922, that panicked sound is not just an anachronism but a discord. But sixty years earlier, when Lawrence's idea of womanhood was already current, it harmonized so well that Emily Dickinson herself spoke it musically.

Her occasion for song was letter 269, which addresses Josiah and Elizabeth Holland in one of the personae that Dickinson used to put on for Josiah: the self-abnegating little girl, so delicate of appetite that she asks, ah! but a word in reply, and at that, ah! but a word in the sweet language of flowers. After Josiah's death, Dickinson's letters to the widowed Elizabeth will be intelligent indeed, but this letter to those still sharing one flesh is a missive in their shared language. Its sociolect is the literary language of what was then called the feminine fifties: the mid-nineteenth century, when American publishers' warehouses were bulging with sentimental novels written for and by ladies. The young Emily Dickinson was one of those ladies, and she became fluent in the language of their interpellating genre. From books like Miller's *Reading in Time* we are learning that we must read such languages topically, but we may also find it desirable to read them in terms of the history of genre. That would show us, for instance, that Dickinson's letter 269 is built up from two of Victorian America's prevalent genre conventions.

One of these is the convention of sentimentality with a sweetly furrowed brow. In *Tom Sawyer*, Mark Twain definitively curates the genre in the chapter about the exercises at the end of the school year, when the girls in the class step forward one by one to recite their tiny, tearful essays. The second genre, however, is less obvious to reading because it was communicated indirectly, as an emotional reaction against the first. Early in its epoch, during the Jacksonian era, it darkens the exasperated anti-gentility of Frances Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans.* By midcentury it shades into panic in Hawthorne's complaint to his publisher about having to compete for sales against "a d—d mob of scribbling women." But it was left to J. G. Holland to articulate it at full length in a best-selling novel.

Published in 1860, this was *Miss Gilbert's Career: An American Story*: the tale of a girl who sells her femininity to the devil and becomes a best-selling novelist, then painfully but joyfully learns that a woman's happiness is to be found only in the silent space under a man's thumb. And Dickinson, writing to the Hollands at about the same time, showed off her fluency in the language of thumb with a bravura display of dimpling insipidity. There, amid whispery intimations of suffering and death, she writes: "Perhaps you laugh at me! Perhaps the whole United States are laughing at me! *I* can't stop for that! *My* business is to love!" A few lines later she turns her little hum about loving through tears into a duet – a duet with a talking, weeping, fainting bird who explains to the poet, "*My* business is to *sing*." And Dr. Holland would have loved every sob, because there Dickinson was coyly quoting one of his own fatuities back to him. In *Miss Gilbert's Career* the line is "Her business is to love," the pronoun "her" refers to woman in general, and its import is that women shouldn't write.

Decades ago, I may have been one of the first twentieth-century readers to notice the ironic game Dickinson was playing there, but at the time I didn't do much with the discovery. In any case, twenty-first century reader, whatever ironies you're thinking of have already been anticipated. Here's your evidence: page 7 of a nine-page review of *Miss Gilbert's Career* published contemporaneously with the sobbings of Emily's dickybird. It demonstrates that there was at least one unladylike reader in 1860 who understood Holland's language in the ways we do. ("Timothy Titcomb" was the pseudonym under which Holland wrote some of his sententious non-fiction.)

womanly a woman is this! Why was Arthur attracted by her and repulsed by Fanny?

One more quotation and we are done. Arthur and Fanny are engaged: —

"Toward her new life, Fanny proceeded tremblingly. Her self-confidence relinquished, she turned to him to whom she had pledged herself for guidance and encouragement. . . . . She had lost her habitual self-seeking, — lost her imperious will, — gladly laid down her proud self-reliance, and found her womanhood. In after months and years, she learned, through feeding the springs of a man's power, enriching the food of his life, purifying his motives, encouraging his efforts, and filling his heart with love, what were her true relations to manhood. . . . . She learned that man holds in his constitution the element of power, — the basis of all demonstrative public functions, — and that, by the degree in which woman possesses this element, is she exceptional, even if she be not abnormal. . . . . When her life had become fully blended into unity with his, she learned that a woman's truest career is lived in love's serene retirement, — lived in feeding the native forces of her other self, — lived in the career of her husband." — pp. 465, 466, 467.

Here we get at the definition of womanhood: it is the absence of "proud self-reliance" in a woman. Hence to Miss Nightingale, Miss Hosmer, Mrs. Patten, — nay, even to Miss Hammett herself, Dr. Holland, the fugitive factory-girl, — no womanhood belongs. *Genus hoc argumenti, attende quo serpat.*

Woman's relation to man, too, is that of a supply-pipe to a reservoir, — a one-sided arrangement which we have before noticed, — or, as it is afterwards expressed, her career consists in the discharge of this feeding process, while living "in love's serene retirement!" The deduction is plain. Women should vote only through their husbands. But what if there is a difference in politics between the twain? O, woman must increase the fuel! Timothy Titcomb, do you believe the Fugitive Slave Law would ever have been enacted, had woman had the right of suffrage? do you believe

The analysis you have just read comes from the November, 1860, number of *The Harvard Magazine*, an undergraduate literary journal. All contributions to the *Magazine* were published anonymously, but in the bound volume from the Indiana University Library that is online at Google Books, a nineteenth-century hand has annotated this book review "Garrison '61" – that is, possibly, Wendell Phillips Garrison (1840-1907), a future literary editor of *The Nation* and (more to the point of the review's combative liberalism) a son of William Lloyd Garrison. If the attribution is correct, it's no wonder that the review and Dickinson's letter speak to us in such different dialects, because their responses to *Miss Gilbert's Career* originated in different fatherlands. One fatherland was the America of the radical William Lloyd Garrison; the other was the America of the conservative Edward Dickinson. Between Garrison the younger and Dickinson the younger, there was precisely all the difference in the world.

On the other hand, precisely what you won't perceive in the archaeological replicas you've just looked at is any difference between Holland and Lawrence. As of 2012, Lawrence is fully Norton-anthologized while Holland barely clings to a historical presence in the stacks, but the two poet-novelists share a still living kinship nevertheless, and that kinship isn't just a pathology suffered in common. Of course women made both men nervous, but in the presence of a poem by Dickinson the sex is inconsequential. After all, to read Emily Dickinson, thief and hoarder of words, is to trade with the poet in selves taken by force or stealth from former owners both female and male and experienced now on her terms, not theirs. But if we haggle with all three of our writers word by word, spreading the terms out on the counter of Emily's shop and sorting them through as she would have done, some differences among their verbal traits may become perceptible. At the level of genre, for instance, a trait that may call itself to our attention is that Holland and Lawrence were both writers of parables, while Dickinson was a writer of gnomes.

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> **Gnome:** a short pithy statement of a general truth; a proverb, maxim, aphorism, or apophthegm. — *Oxford English Dictionary*
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> **Your Gnome –** : Dickinson, signature to letter 280, to Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Annotating this letter, Thomas H. Johnson writes, "[Higginson] could never explain the reason for the signature. One conjectures that perhaps he had earlier commented on the gnomic quality of her verses."

Working within the genre conventions of imaginative prose, Lawrence and Holland responded to a psychic threat from the feminine by creating a feminine symbol and crushing it. Much of Dickinson's prose worked within genre convention as well, and the threats to which it responded were likewise psychic threats. But there is one late letter which almost uniquely responds to a threat from outside, where the symbols aren't just allegorical and the passage of time can be understood only sequentially, as a story on a page.

This is letter 610, Dickinson's miniature memoir of the great fire which devastated the commercial center of Amherst in the early hours of July 4, 1879, and (as Dickinson says) might have consumed the Homestead too if the wind had changed direction. The horror of that possibility is what racks the letter into its dramatically short focus. The poet had no words to spare for the Evergreens, for instance, even though the Evergreens stood closer to the danger. No; the descriptions in this text have the single-mindedness of a dream and yet stand as distinct from one another as facets of a jewel seen through a loupe. Their ever-changing foreground is all brilliance; their background is a void.

The letter both begins and ends with a scene set by language and governed by the grammatical rules which underwrite language's promise of comprehensibility: Lavinia's reassurance, "Don't be afraid, Emily, it is only the fourth of July." But that sentence of Lavinia's was a fiction, and Dickinson knew it was a fiction, and knew too that she couldn't say she knew. Her record of that perception was yet another fiction, for this letter was intended for the archive of babytalk that Dickinson compiled, year after year, for her adult cousins Louise and Frances Norcross. As archived, the poet's own sentence about the deception is an almost unbroken series of monosyllables, gently arranged in parataxis for readers with diminished capacity: "I did not tell that I saw it, for I thought if she felt it best to deceive, it must be that it was."

To have effected that reduction of rhythm and syntax was to have created a work of art: something which (in the words of Shklovsky's "Art as Technique," section 15) "makes objects 'unfamiliar,' makes forms difficult, increases the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself." In Dickinson's tone row, the mimetic effect reenacts horror by detaching the poet's characteristic succinctness from its genre norm, the epigram, and attributing to it the piteousness of sounds mouthed in vain to the dumb. But as the fire's danger recedes, narrative, the "once upon a time" effect, takes control over the text. The defamiliarization goes feminine-fifties literary then, employing both the atlas (theatre, London) and the lexicon (sweet, prattling) to direct perception away from anything like an actual fire. "It seemed like a theatre," writes Cousin Emily, who had probably never visited a theatre – "or a night in London, or perhaps like chaos. The innocent dew falling 'as if it thought no evil,' . . . and sweet frogs prattling in the pools as if there were no earth." The phrase in quotation marks also sounds like a stock irony (little did they know!) from a sermon about the day of doom and the end of time. Lou and Fanny and we have been narrated on our way: hustled away from the scene of horror as rapidly as we were hustled in.

But our forced dismissal, fobbed off with a mere anticlimactic "Once upon a time," had its own purpose. It was a genre purpose, and it brought itself to consciousness by vitiating and falsifying genre. Swaddling an instant's naked perception in second thoughts, it replaced perception with a couture. The genre couture worn by second thought ("And the moral is . . . ") is called parable, and it was essentially all that D. H. Lawrence had to wear in "The Fox" and J. G. Holland had to wear in *Miss Gilbert's Career*. Of course, one of the Emily Dickinsons resident in the Norton Anthology wore parable, too: not just in the second half of letter 610 but in most of the poems beloved in the Todd-Higginson editions of the 1890s, before the Great War showed readers

how much cannot be seen when we restrict ourselves to parabolic thinking. ("Went to war with Rupert Brooke, came home with Siegfried Sassoon.") Fortunately for us, however, there is an additional Dickinson at home in the anthology. This is the Dickinson who moved into the book a few pages before the modernists: the Dickinson who wrote to the widowed Elizabeth Holland about a wagon and a fallen apple, the Dickinson who noticed that the heads of a team of horses had begun turning in horrifying sync toward eternity, the Dickinson who saw nakedly and amorally. Our recorder of the actual in its final wording, noticed the instant before the parabolists could get to it. Our rag lady, stealing the parabolists' wardrobes and shredding them back to their fabric, back to words merely as such. Our nude among the words. Our gnome.

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